

**SUSTAIN SOUTHERN MAINE
DUNSTAN CORNER, SCARBOROUGH
LESSONS LEARNED**

Realities and Assets in a Highway-Oriented Neighborhood Center

1. An original village settlement that has evolved along an arterial such as Route 1 into a highway-oriented commercial strip faces **constraints to redevelopment**:

- The **form of much of the development** is set -- with buildings that at one time fronted on a narrower Route 1 replaced by single-story structures set back from a widened highway with long frontages and separated from sidewalks by parking lots.
 - The **lack of internal street connections** reinforces this established pattern and limits frontage available for new development.
 - The existing form represents a **significant barrier to “re-branding” the area** as a destination neighborhood center, differentiating it from other similar strips.
- The multi-lane highway required to accommodate high traffic flows **cuts the surrounding neighborhood in half**, with minimal pedestrian connection between the two sides and limited prospects to bridge this division.
- Other commercial districts within 3 to 5 miles, if more fully developed with neighborhood commercial uses such as food stores, will **limit the potential to attract the missing pieces** that would enable the area to serve a more comprehensive neighborhood commercial role.

2. But a commercial strip with a village heritage also has **assets that present opportunities for profitable development and redevelopment**:

- Large areas of **vacant land to the rear of the strip** present a good opportunity to add a new tier of commercial, mixed-use, and residential development if new points of access can be found. In the case of Dunstan Corner, this new access comes (1) in the form of the relocation of an existing road (Payne Road) en route to a new intersection with Route 1 near the northern end of the neighborhood and (2) as the result of a planned development known as Dunstan Crossing, now under construction, on a large parcel at the southern edge of the area.
- The **residential base** that was always part of the village and continued to grow even as the primary road – in Dunstan’s case, Route 1 – evolved into an auto-dominated

commercial strip often is substantial and provides a strong customer base for existing and potential future businesses.

- The combination of through-traffic on the highway and the surrounding “home town” residential base can **sustain a larger variety of types of business** than either could support on its own.

3. If the vestiges of a village remain – as it does at Dunstan Corner – there may be **the opportunity to grow again in a village format**, and doing so will differentiate it from other Route 1 commercial areas as an identifiable place.

Place in the Hierarchy of Centers

4. Thinking about the growth potential of an existing district **requires understanding its place in the hierarchy of commercial centers**: does it have the draw (from largest market area to smallest) of a regional, community, neighborhood, or convenience center? Dunstan Corner once played a more complete role as a small **neighborhood retail center**. It no longer has a full-line grocery store but retains vestiges of a neighborhood center, including drug store, hardware store, a few restaurants, medical and personal services, and civic uses such as a church and a fire station. It is reasonable to expect that Dunstan can become a stronger neighborhood center with a variety of uses that appeal to key market segments, including the so-called Generation Y (now entering its household formation years) and the Baby Boom generation as it enters into its retirement years.

5. Small former village centers situated along highways often are en route to other destinations that draw travelers through them, which in turn are fuel for growth. In the case of Dunstan Corner, the destinations are job centers to the north and the seasonal settlement at Pine Point to the east. The seasonal traffic especially **enables the center to stretch beyond its normal place in the retail hierarchy into specialty stores** and services that could not otherwise be supported.

Capacity for Growth

6. **Growing the residential base**, preferably within a 0.25- to 0.5-mile band of the business district, is essential to growth as a more complete neighborhood center. A built-in residential population – especially where competing centers are located within 3-to-5 miles – **is the surest path toward success as a center** with a more complete array of neighborhood-oriented goods and services.

- Dunstan Corner’s built-in residential base – including those living in the neighborhood proper and those who must commute through the district to reach their nearby homes – is more than 4,500 people living in about 1,800 households. This is at the low end of

what is needed to support a neighborhood center, even with supplemental pass-through and seasonal traffic.

- Dunstan Corner has an adjacent land base that is vacant, buildable, and zoned for sufficient residential growth, with standards that encourage a traditional neighborhood form, to eventually support a more complete set of neighborhood goods and services.
- Including approved development at Dunstan Crossing and areas suitable for future development, Dunstan Corner has the capacity for at least 400-500 new dwellings over the next 25 years, or at least 10% or more of the total projected for Scarborough.
- If Dunstan Corner can re-establish an identity as a place with village services and amenities that appeal to the growing segments of southern Maine's population – especially Generation Y and Baby Boomers – businesses catering to them will follow.

7. **The physical capacity for commercial growth is plentiful.** Given gaps in the existing commercial base at Dunstan Corner, a scenario of around 500 new dwellings, and continued seasonal population flows through the neighborhood, planning might reasonably anticipate demand for a net gain of commercial space in the range of 150,000 sq. ft. **The supply of land to accommodate this growth exceeds the demand.** The challenge, therefore, will be to **resist spreading out to consume the available acreage, and instead grow compactly** enough to create critical mass and the image of an identifiable place – one that announces itself as a destination.

Uses

8. A suburban village such as Dunstan Corner that aspires to be a more complete neighborhood center can **take stock of its existing goods and services and target the gaps.**¹ When it also serves roles such as a supply center for a downstream seasonal community, there are additional opportunities to target. In the case of Dunstan Corner, a partial list of opportunities includes:

- Full service food store – but likely using a small grocery store template scaled to the size of the local market and that differentiates it from the supermarkets elsewhere along Route 1
- Additional specialty food stores
- Coffee shops and a greater variety of eating places

¹ The profile of businesses typical of neighborhood commercial centers is well known, and lists are available in publications such as the Urban Land Institute's *Dollars and Cents of Shopping Centers*. ULI's publication focuses on shopping center properties, but the mix of businesses typical of a given type of district holds whether the location is urban or suburban and whether the center is in single-ownership on one large parcel or in multiple ownership on multiple parcels, as in the case of Dunstan Corner.

- Banking services
- Senior housing, ranging from independent living to assisted living
- Housing as part of mixed-use design within the commercial district
- Entertainment uses
- Specialty retail appropriate for a location that is also at a seasonal visitors' crossroad
- Additional medical, health-related, and other personal services
- Additions to the local professional office market

It is useful also to consider amenity gaps that need to be filled to meet the expectations of a neighborhood center, such as a park and/or other dedicated public green space, located and designed to help build the neighborhood's brand.

9. If there is a sufficient depth of land with development or redevelopment opportunities reaching back 1,500 or more feet from the arterial, **it is useful to consider a gradation of land uses, from intensive commercial near the arterial, to mixed use and multifamily along the new main street, to single-family at the edges.** The circulation system needs to be designed to connect the components to the main street.

“Imageability”

10. Re-establishing a commercial strip as the heart of a village-style neighborhood center requires **improving its “imageability.”** “Imageability” is “the quality of a place that makes it distinct, recognizable, and memorable.”² A place with high “imageability” usually also is one that is valued by residents, neighborhood-scale businesses, and the real estate market. The factors that create “imageability” are well established.³ Among them are:

- Edges – the perceived boundaries of a place, which among other things lets the visitor know when he or she has arrived; and, once arrived, through the location of buildings along the street, creates the sense of inviting, outdoor rooms.
- Paths – the streets, sidewalks, and ways that people travel
- Nodes – the focal points of the place. These include intersections, squares, and – prominent in the New England village – greens located at the junctions of streets or paths.
- Landmarks – readily identifiable objects (such as an important building, an element of a building such as a steeple, a prominent statue, memorial or other art) that serve as external reference points.

² Ewing, Reid, and Bartholomew, Keith, *Pedestrian and Transit-Oriented Design*, Urban Land Institute and American Planning Association, 2013.

³ The classic study was Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City*, published in 1960.

It is possible for a single property owner, trying to distinguish his or her business, to create “imageability” on a single site, but it usually depends on the layout and elements of the district as a whole, even if the pieces will be implemented incrementally.

Dunstan Corner is fortunate to have the opportunity to dramatically improve its “imageability” at both its northern and southern entries. Development at the new Payne Road – Route 1 intersection at the northern end and at Dunstan Crossing’s planned commercial node at the southern end – if carried out in a way intended to improve Dunstan Corner’s “imageability” -- can help define the neighborhood as a memorable place for decades to come.

Incorporating Limiting Factors into the Design

11. It is common for an arterial and its associated development to have been originally located to avoid difficult terrain, wetlands, or other limiting feature of the landscape. **New development that extends beyond the “strip” will need to design around the limitation and, if possible, incorporate it as an element of the design.**

In the case of Dunstan Corner, the limitation is a stream and nearby slopes that in places are steep. The stream already is classified as having impaired water quality.

- Development draining to the stream will need to incorporate buffers and vegetative treatment systems, which can double as visual amenities and potentially as a recreational amenity if trails can be incorporated.
- Farther from the stream’s embankments, but where slope still is a factor, buildings can be designed as split level, presenting a two- or three-story face along one side of the new main street, where a strong building edge is needed to define the streetscape; and a second at-grade point of entry on the opposite side of the building, next to parking.

Where to Start: the Framework

12. **If village-friendly zoning is not in place, it is a necessary first step** to both encourage and guide the growth of the center. In the case of Dunstan Corner, such zoning is in place, in the form of Town and Village Center zoning districts. These districts are friendly to mixed-use with flexibility for planned development that meets certain village-oriented design standards.

13. **It is likely that a suburban village** that has been bisected by a heavily traveled, multi-lane arterial **will need a new “main street.”** The new street will open up frontage and create the relatively fresh start that is not available if the arterial’s frontage already is developed. At Dunstan Corner, the potential for a new “main street” is being partly realized through the relocation of a principal road (Payne Road) to create a safer, new intersection with Route 1. The relocated road can serve as the beginning point of a new “main street” that runs behind

Route 1. Elsewhere, the new “main street” may be initiated as part of privately planned development or as a public-private partnership.

An effective new “main street” needs to:

- have length to represent a typical “block” (300 -500 feet) and preferably two or three such “blocks” for critical mass and to have enough activity along it to serve as a new attractor; in the case of Dunstan Corner, the realigned Payne Road will need to be extended to open up key vacant land and create this length;
- be divided into easily walkable blocks, whether through placement of short cross streets or use of parking access points, so that it reads as a main street;
- have line of sight from the arterial at least at its intersection with the arterial and good directional signage along the arterial.

14. While the arterial’s frontage may already be developed, **opportunities to redevelop in a different design format likely will come about wherever the new “main street” intersects with the arterial** and gives the surrounding parcels new market status.

- This will be especially true if there is a traffic signal at the new intersection, as in the case of Dunstan Corner. A traffic signal on a busy road confers advantage on the adjacent parcels by (a) providing guaranteed turns into and out of the parcels and (b) providing the opportunity for stopped traffic to observe the adjacent businesses and their offerings.

15. A heavily travelled arterial such as Route 1 makes turning onto it – and crossing it – tricky. **The need to turn onto it or cross it can be reduced if each side of the arterial has a local, interconnected street system**, by which residents and customers can reach several different businesses or other destinations without having to venture onto the arterial. There are some opportunities to create such a system at Dunstan Corner. **But the design of the system has to avoid turning existing residential streets into shortcuts for commercial traffic – and this likely will limit the amount of interconnection that otherwise would be possible.**

Where to Start: Phasing of Development

16. **A long-time commercial area such as Dunstan Corner has significant infrastructure, and it may be possible to employ it for the initial phase of village-style development without great upfront capital cost.** For example, it may be possible to locate the first round of new development along the prospective new main street using existing points of access from the arterial. This development, in turn, can generate revenues to help finance the extension of the new street and enable the subsequent phase of development along the main street.

Speaking to the Needs of Existing Residents and Future Businesses

17. Any community with older, existing single-family neighborhoods is likely to be leery of additional growth and density, both residential and commercial. Residents are likely to look upon change as a threat, as they see their neighborhood as a peaceful place apart that needs to be protected against encroachment. In Dunstan's case, **finding out what small commercial services might be supported/needed by people in these neighborhoods and emphasizing that the neighborhood's character is protected by current zoning may help to produce a useful dialogue.** The benefits to existing residents of a more complete neighborhood center need to be explored and not assumed.

18. If there is a strong public interest in fostering village-style economic growth in a location such as Dunstan Corner, and if the location does not have strong natural advantages versus competing locations, **the town may need to consider incentives that would create advantage.** This might be in the form of tax increment financing to assist with infrastructure or amortization of developer debt; or carrying out some pre-permitting steps (especially with state and federal agencies, if their reviews will be required) that will streamline the regulatory process for future development.